FORTUNES WASHED AWAY

A Series of Dramatizations of Better Land Use

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"MISSISSIPPI PLANTATION"

W·L·W CINCINNATI

United States Department of Agriculture
Soil Conservation Service
Dayton · Ohio

SOUND: Whistling wind...

VOICE

Black blizzards across the plains.

SOUND OFF MIKE: Woman coughing...

SECOND VOICE

Biting wind!

DEEP VOICE

Choking dust.

SOUND: Up wind, set fire...

VOICE

Havoc...

SECOND VOICE

Destruction...

DEEP VOICE

Waste...

SOUND: Up wind, kill fire, set flood...

VOICE

Floods rushing down the great valleys.

VOICES IN UNISON

Floods, drowning, killing, wasting...

SOUND: Up wind...

DEEP VOICE

The wealth of America washing and blowing away -- soil erosion!

SOUND: Clap of thunder...

ANNOUNCER

Mississippi Plantation: the 151st consecutive episode of Fortunes Washed Away!

ORGAN THEME: DEEP RIVER

ANNOUNCER

Hugging the Tennessee border, in the shape of a gigantic letter "T", sprawls Benton County, Mississippi. Agriculture has always been the lifeblood of its small communities, has been the basis of support for all its peoples. The county, which was created in 1870 from parts of adjoining Tippah and Marshall Counties, was named for Colonel Thomas Benton, whose blood was spilt in Georgia during the war between the states. But long before that, long before Benton County was organized, an agrarian culture had been developed that was the envy of the countryside. Stories of those gay plantation days of long ago are told again and again whenever native Benton countians gather. Our story today takes us back to 1841, to the Hamer plantation. County Agent Edgar Johnson tells the story....(fade)

SOUND: Automobile back of voice...

NARRATOR

And now, stranger, we're near the site of the old Hamer mansion. All of this land in every direction, five thousand acres of it, belonged to Tom Hamer, the original settler. Let's park here.

SOUND: Car comes to halt. Door slams.

NARRATOR (Continuing)

You see that rounded hill? They call it Hamer mountain. Let's walk on up. Right there's where the old mansion stood. (SOFTLY) Can't you picture, in your mind's eye, stranger, the stately columns, the lovely flowers and shrubbery, the winding driveway with its avenue of cedars on each side, the silver of the poplar trees as their leaves swayed in the wind? Turn around, stranger. Down at the foot of the hill were the white-washed cabins of the negroes. Look down across the slope. Can't you almost see the miles of cleared cotton fields, and over at the edge the virgin forest, dark and cool even in the hottest noon? Ah, and if you listen closely, you can almost hear the slaves singing....listen.. stranger....listen...(fades)

SOUND: Banjo plunking lively tune. Sounds of gaiety. Occasional snatches of song.

HAMER (shouting)

Hey! Get those axes swinging! Got to start the plows next week!

SOUND: Banjo breaks off abruptly. Shouts of Yassa boss! Yassa Boss Axes ring against trees.

HAMER

Uncle Isaac! Come heah a minute.

UNCLE ISAAC (fading in)

Yassa, boss, I'se comin'.

HAMER (sternly)

You know I don't like this loafin'. There's work to be done.

UNCLE ISAAC

I'se po'ful sorry, boss, 'deed I is. It don' happen frequent. Dey boys jus' got kinda tired. Dose trees and dat brush suah make mighty tough axin'.

HAMER

I'm holdin' you responsible for gettin' this new bottom cleared.

UNCLE ISAAC

Suah will be did, boss. We all'll have it done 'fo' nex week!

HAMER

See that you do. (RELAXING A BIT.) This new bottom sure ought to make some mighty fine cotton!

UNCLE ISAAC

Suah should, boss, suah should. Reckon we can count on it for more than a bale ter the acre.

HAMER

And two or three loads of corn.

UNCLE ISAAC

Suah is rich lan', boss. Don' reckon it'll evah weah out!

HAMER

'Course not! Well, see that you keep those boys busy.

UNCLE ISAAC

Yassa, boss! I'll suah drive 'em hard!

SOUND: Muffled hoof beats as horse trots off, fading for.....

NARRATOR

Those were wonderful days, stranger. The land was new and fertile. Crops were bountiful. The plantation, they say, was so productive back before the Civil war, that they called it Egypt. The slaves tilled the rich soil while the "white folks" enjoyed a life of ease. Almost nightly there were neighborhood gatherings. Many's the gay party that was held here on Hamer mountain, in this fine old home. Just close your eyes a minute stranger. (SOFTLY) It's moonlight....it's spring, many, many years ago.....(Fade)

SOUND: Gay dance music, sound of dancing feet, laughter. Party atmosphere.

SOUND: Door closes, fading music in another room.

SARA HAMER

Thought I'd come out to the kitchen and see how you were getting along, Sukie.

SUKIE

Land sakes, Mis Hamer, dese parties gittin' me down! Compny, compny. And my feet hurtin' me agin, too!

SARA

You've got plenty of help, Sukie.

SUKIE

Most this help no count. Jest can't depend on 'em for nuthin'. Means I gotta do most the fixin' myself! Can' nobody ever say the 'freshments at Hamer plantation ain't the best there is!

SARA

Everything does look good, Sukie.

SOUND: Door opens, bringing in music, closes, fading music.

HAMER (chuckling)

I thought I'd find you out here checking up on the eats, my dear!

SUKIE (muttering)

Checkin' up, checkin' up.

SARA

Tom, it's such a lovely night. Suppose we could leave our guests for just a while for a moonlight stroll?

HAMER

Don't see why not. They're all having such a good time they'll never miss us. That boy of Uncle Isaac's sure can dance! (Chuckles). Will you need a wrap, dear?

SARA

Oh no. It's so warm.

SOUND: Outside door opens, closes. Music cuts out entirely.

SARA

Let's go over by the sunken garden, Tom.

HAMER (jokingly)

Still like it up here on Hamer Mountain, my love?

SARA

Oh, Tom, don't tease me. You know I love this place. Ah, this beautiful garden!

HAMER

That's all your work, my dear.

SARA

Look at that riot of color in the moonlight, Tom! Isn't it gorgeous? The narcissus, crocus, daffodills, the frothing of pink peach blossoms...and dogwood dappling with white stars...

HAMER (laughing)

That's quite poetic, Sara!

SARA

But that's the way I feel, Tom. To me, this place is everything. (PAUSE) I know it's silly, Tom, but sometimes I have the feeling that all this is too wonderful to last...that maybe things won't be the same for our children.

HAMER

Now that is silly talk, Sara! Why this rich red clay will last forever! Our sons, and our sons' sons, will be rich! Everything comes from the land, Sara; everything that we have came from it. And it will be here forever and forever, just like tonight! But come, let's go back to our guests!

ORGAN: Ominous, prophetic music, fading for...

NARRATOR (almost whispering)

Did you hear that, stranger? Woman's intuition? Look about you. See the ruins of the Hamer mansion? Look down the slope again. See that tremendous gully? Why, it's 90 feet deep, and 200 feet wide! Look on further to the once-rich bottoms. Look closely and you'll see that the red clay is covered by overwash from the slopes above, with subsoil washed out of the great gully. You see, don't you stranger, how tragically wrong Tom Hamer was, how prophetic was the vision of his wife, Sara? But listen again stranger, to the voices out of the past, voices of less than 40 years after that night in the garden...in the moonlight..... listen....(Fade)

SUKIE (very old, now)

Marse Tom, dere ain't a bit of lard in dat can.

TOM (crossly)

Well, open another one then.

SUKIE

Dere ain't no more cans. Dat's de las' one.

TOM

That's a fine come off. (SADLY) Why, we used to, even after Dad was gone....we used to kill 100 head of hogs...we had hams two years old all the time. We had lard to give away. And now... and now...we've got to buy lard!

SUKIE

De land ain't what it was, Marse Tom.

TOM (sadly)

Yes, I know, Sukie. It's eroded and washed and gullied. I remember when we got a bale of cotton to the acre and two or three loads of corn. Now, we're lucky to get a third of a bale, and half a load of corn.

SUKIE

Sad days has come to Hamer plantation, sho' 'nuff.

TOM (sighing)

Well, guess I'll have to go to the bank and get a loan. And I just can't carry the tenants any longer. (WISTFULLY) Wonder if the bank will give me even half as much as I need?....(Fade)

ORGAN: Mournful, slow music, fading in back of...

NARRATOR (softly, organ in background)

Are you still listening, stranger? Open your eyes now. Look around you again. Don't you see the corpse? The corpse of a plantation that has died? Yes, this plantation died just as surely as you and I will die! It died from neglect and abuse. The rich red soil is gone...gone with the wind and water. (STRONGER) Soil erosion, stranger, that's what killed this plantation! (RISING) And it's killing and killing on other broad acres. This land of ours must not die! There must be no more corpses like this! Do you hear? Are you listening, stranger?

ORGAN: UP AND OUT.

ANNOUNCER

That is the true story of the Hamer plantation, Benton County, Mississippi. And now, once again we turn to the Soil Conservation Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, and here is Hal Jenkins.

JENKINS

Thank you, John Cornell. Before we start talking about things down in good old Mississippi, I'd like to express my appreciation for the help of County Agent Edgar Johnson of Ashland, Mississippi, in preparing the dramatization the WLW dramatic staff has just so ably presented. Mrs. Johnson was very helpful, too, and so was E. F. Hurdle, the district conservationist for the Soil Conservation Service.

ANNOUNCER

District conservationist, eh? Well that must mean Benton County has a soil conservation district.

JENKINS

It means just twice that much, John. Benton County is in parts of two soil conservation districts. But before we get into the work of these two districts I would like to make it clear that there's a lot of land in Benton County worth saving, and I've never seen, anywhere, a more determined and cooperative effort underway to save the soil.

ANNOUNCER

Sounds like somebody in that county must be a real spark-plug.

JENKINS

A real spark-plug is right. And that spark-plug is none other than Edgar Johnson, the county agent. You should have been down there with me, John, to see the way he has the ball rolling. He has everybody going in the same direction, and that direction is toward soil conservation and better land use.

ANNOUNCER

You seem to be pretty enthused over things down Benton County way.

JENKINS

You'd be enthused, too, John, if you had been with me. I want to tell you a few things about the old Hamer plantation...but first I want to give you some amazing figures on terracing.

ANNOUNCER

Well, let's have those amazing figures, Hal.

JENKINS

Well, long before the soil conservation districts were organized, Benton County farmers formed an erosion control association. J. W. Hardaway is president and E. H. Thomas is secretary and treasurer. They purchased a power terracing unit. Now here's what they've done with it: They have constructed terraces on 16 thousand acres of land. This means that the terracer has operated almost continuously for nearly 5 years--that's almost 5,000 hours of uninterrupted operations.

ANNOUNCER

Whew! That's a lot of terraces! This uninterrupted operations business interests me, Hal. How do they do it?

JENKINS

The secret is that old, old word--cooperation. When I was down there a couple of weeks ago the terracer was scheduled several months ahead. That's where they eliminate delays, John. The same hour the terracing is done on one farm they move to the adjoining farm and start right in. Mr. Hurdle, and technician, and his crew, work well ahead of the terracing machine, laying out the contour lines. Of course, they charge the individual farmer for use of the terracing machine, but the money goes into a kitty to maintain the machine. Right now, they have almost enough money ahead to buy a new terracer.

ANNOUNCER

That sounds like the deluxe brand of cooperation.

JENKINS

It's really the super, super deluxe brand, John. Of course, terracing isn't the only thing they're doing down in this north Mississippi County. The farmers have adopted regular crop rotations -- something they could well have used on the old Hamer plantation. They are using small grains and lespedeza in the rotations about one-third of the time. You know they are close-growing crops and hold the soil. Under their cooperative seed saving program this past year they saved more than 22 thousand pounds of lespedeza seed to carry out the plantings required in their rotations.

ANNOUNCER

I'm glad you mentioned the Hamer plantation again, Hal. I'd like to hear some more about that.

JENKINS

Of course it isn't a plantation anymore, John. The original Tom Hamer plantation was about 5,000 acres. It is now divided into about 24 individual farms, only six of which are in the hands of descendants of the original owner.

ANNOUNCER

Well, is any of this land that used to be part of the old plantation receiving conservation treatment?

JENKINS

Definitely, John. Fourteen of the 24 farms of the old plantation are being managed the conservation way. They have been completely planned for erosion control. And, under wise use, the land <u>is</u> coming back.

ANNOUNCER

That was some whopper of a gully -- that Hamer gully. I suppose they've fixed that up.

JENKINS

Well, hardly, John. You see, gullies that are as old as the Hamer gully take many years to heal. But I'm sure they have it stopped. The water has been diverted by the CCC boys, and the head of the gully has been sloped and planted. It shows no signs of further advancement up the slope. By the way, John, nobody knows just how old that gully is. All of the older residents of the community with whom I talked said it was a big gully when they were youngsters.

ANNOUNCER

The hands of that old clock are getting around to that time, Hal.

JENKINS

Yes, I know, John. Let me leave this thought with you. Most of the mistakes that have been made in the past in Benton County are being corrected. You can see the results of conservation work written on the land. A few years from now I'll wager that much of the land will again look like it did in those glorious days of the Hamer plantation.

ORGAN THEME: DEEP RIVER.

JENKINS (on cue)

This is Hal Jenkins saying goodbye for the Soil Conservation Service. We'll be back again next Saturday with another story of Fortunes Washed Away.

ORGAN: UP AND OUT.